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OPINION

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South Plainfield proposal a model brownfields plan

Polluted property would become useful again

Last week, two former owners of a Superfund site in South Plainfield came forward with a proposal to turn its dross into gold.

The plan they presented to residents and town officials envisions a bustling, clean tract of land that has the best of both worlds: shopping and open space, parking and storage facilities, offices and greenery. In one fell swoop, a large tract of useless — and polluted — land might become a vibrant and important part of a renewed downtown.

The proposal is in its infancy and has a long and arduous journey before it with no guarantee of success. But this is just the sort of building that is supposed to be taking place under the so-called brownfields regulations.

The idea is that companies responsible for paying for cleanups can reduce their costs by coming up with a workable plan they can sell to a developer. The developer is guaranteed clean land and the possibility of grants or loans. The community benefits, meanwhile, because the land gets cleaned up much faster than it might otherwise. The EPA could take as long as eight years to clean up the South Plainfield site without a plan. With it, the cleanup could take as little as two.

This type of project might be helped by a federal bill that would provide \$750 million for brownfields cleanup. The bill, sponsored by Sen. Frank R. Lautenberg, D-N.J., is a worthy effort that could pay big dividends in New Jersey.

For example, Elizabeth Mayor J. Christian Bollwage, who already has watched brownfields in his city sprout a shopping mall, a supermarket and a ball field, figures that another 12,000 jobs could be created in Elizabeth if its 825 acres of remaining brownfields were developed. There is similar potential in Perth Amboy.

Besides bringing new life to this otherwise useless land, brownfields redevelopment also harnesses suburban sprawl by pushing construction, especially commercial construction, back to traditional centers.